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Leipziger, Henry Marcus

The free lecture course in  
New York City

New York

1903

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Box 26

Address of

DR. HENRY M. LEIPZIGER

Supervisor of Free Lectures

at the

Thirteenth Annual Reunion and Dinner

May 2nd 1903

THE  
FREE LECTURE COURSE  
IN NEW YORK CITY

ADDRESS OF  
DR. HENRY M. LEIPZIGER

SUPERVISOR OF FREE LECTURES

AT THE  
THIRTEENTH ANNUAL REUNION AND DINNER

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## ADDRESS

*Dr. Leipziger said:*

One of my friends here to-night, knowing that I had been requested to speak for the thirteenth time on the same theme, asked me if I did not find the task a rather dry one. Before replying, I told him that his question reminded me of an anecdote that I had heard about a certain Egyptologist who had made a collection of mummies. Exhibiting them one day to a friend, he said: "I have names for each of these mummies," and pointing to one, he said: "This I call Veuve Clicquot." When asked why he gave it this name, he said: "Because this is *extra dry*." To express myself truly, however, I would say that never since I have spoken have I found the theme so fascinating, nor felt my power to do it justice more feeble. The story of the development of the Lecture System from year to year presents new situations and opens new possibilities, so that its constant growth makes the field of adult education resemble a fertile and inexhaustible field, producing year by year larger and richer crops. Education for adults is no longer an experiment. In this great city with its mixed population it has been proven beyond doubt that there are no boundary lines in education, and that to limit it to the few years of life between the age of six and fourteen is as undemocratic as it is unwise; that the theory, in which we believe, that the *city shall educate*, must be broad enough to include in the term "education" the kindergarten, the elementary school, the high school, the college, and the post-school (for those who do

not go to college as well as those who have left its walls), which has become so widely known under the general term, "Free Lectures to the People." This term, "free lectures to the people," is sometimes misleading, for these lectures, while they may seem at times disconnected and isolated, yet bear a relationship to a great organic whole. The thread of unity binds them together, and year by year better organization, closer correlation, and a more intimate connection between the work of preceding years is established. There have been 116 different *courses* of lectures given during the past year, varying in length from three to twelve. The lectures are of value only to those who go to learn, to be stimulated and to be inspired, and the believer in democracy and in civic progress must certainly have his optimism justified when he knows that the total attendance during the season that closed yesterday reached the figure of 1,203,000. A cosmopolitan city that has in it such a body of seekers after truth has in it all the elements that make for civic righteousness. If ten righteous men would have been able to save the city of Sodom, what possibilities of clean living, what hope of reaching an ideal city have we not, when we can find hundreds of thousands of men and women, after the heat and toil of the day, longing for the hand to guide them into the realms of literature, art, music or science, where they shall come in communion with those great souls whose noble thoughts have marked the progress of man on the road to civilization. Democratic education throughout the world is practically not much more than a generation old. The Kindergarten and the High School in our own city are but recent additions to the educational structure, and the marvelous development (despite many handicaps) of the Free Lecture System gives us but a faint con-

ception of what under proper conditions shall develop in the ten years to come. In 1889 there were given 200 lectures, with a total attendance of 22,000; last year the attendance was 928,000, and of the season just closed 1,203,000, an increase during the past year of about 30 per cent. Four thousand two hundred and twenty-one lectures were given in 128 different places, covering every portion of our city, thus welding the elements of Greater New York, making this the most stupendous scheme of its kind to-day, or perhaps for any day in the history of man. But we do not dwell upon figures nor glory in size alone, but we ask rather what is the meaning, what is the value of this widespread diffusion of the poetry of Shakespeare, of the experimental talk in science, of the illustrated description in geography, of the eloquence which vivifies the life of the great patriot; what but to spread abroad among the mass of people who form this greatest of American cities good taste, accurate information, true ideals of the nobler use of life; to teach the truth that shall make them attain physical well-being, shall promote purer conversation, and give more accurate economic knowledge, more sympathy with nature, more desire and longing for the beauty and the grace of the true life. The creation of a true civic ideal has been vastly furthered through this medium, the most democratic medium yet devised. No institution that has grown for the past fifty years has had such generous support, financial and moral, from our democratic communities as the schoolhouse. The Court House has its special place in our civilization, and at one time it formed the finest architectural feature of the community. The Church, which should stand for unity, is, alas, too much divided among the sects. The schoolhouse stands for that idea of unity which not alone welds into one giant noble commonwealth

the different sections of this vast land of ours, but which stands for the spiritual unity which shall bind within its noble embrace all the forms of humanity, whose types come with such a hearty welcome to our shores, and so in the schoolhouse the ideals of the Italian, of the Irishman, of the Jew, of the Scandinavian, of the German, are consolidated into that nobler type which we trust shall stand in the time to come as the noblest of all—the American.

The increase of the number of lecture centers, the number of lecturers and the number of auditors, indicate, as I have said, that the desire for this continuation of education among the people is genuine. It is recognized that our city receives the bulk of the emigration that comes to our shores, and a large percentage of those who land at the Barge Office remain within our city's limits. Here we can see virtually the process of making an American, so our city becomes a great laboratory for the discovery, not of a chemical element, like radium, but of a new spiritual element, a new man. Noticing this ardor of the people we are reminded of what a New Englander said to an Englishman as they stood together on the Hill of Plymouth and looked across the sandy shores of Massachusetts. "What do you raise in a country like this," said the foreigner, and the American answered, "We raise men."

During the past year an experiment was made in reaching two classes of our immigrant population ignorant of the English language, the Jewish element and the Italian element, by a process hitherto untried. On the 1st of March last, three lecture centers were opened in which the lectures were to be given to Italians in the Italian language, on subjects relating to American history, citizenship and sanitation, and similar subjects were treated in what is known as the Yiddish term. It was suggested that

the Italian element, not having been accustomed to regular attendance at schools, and leading largely an open-air life in their own land, would not willingly avail themselves of this opportunity, but although a few weeks only have elapsed since the making of this experiment, it is pleasing to say that on the last Sunday in April, at both the lectures in Italian and in Yiddish, every available seat was taken, and the promise and hope for larger usefulness in the fall amply justified. There is no fear that the use of these languages will create an isolation or a desire of the auditors not to acquire the language of the country, but it is rather a medium adopted through which to urge upon these immigrants the wisdom of soon learning the language of the country, and through this medium to tell them, in the best way we can, what is meant by the American life and the American ideal.

To further expand the use of the school, the experiment of opening some of the schools for lectures on Sunday was also begun in March. Two lecture centers were established, and at both the attendances as to quality and earnestness was all that could be desired and showed that a "long felt want" had been gratified. Requests for establishment of other Sunday lecture centers have come in from various parts of our city.

Again I wish to emphasize the fact that the department of lectures is not a bureau of lectures, but directs a system of adult education; that it has two purposes. First, to give instruction in an interesting form to those who have been limited in intellectual training; Second, to give to those who wish to continue their intellectual training the results of the latest information in science, and the latest knowledge in history, literature and art. It adopts the true pedagogic method, in that it makes instruction



interesting, although it never loses sight of its main object. The expense of the lecture courses would be justified did they but add to the true joy of our citizens, for I believe with President Eliot that to increase rational joy is one of the objects which public education should always keep in sight. And for that reason, among the subjects that are included in our comprehensive scheme, music plays no unimportant part. For music is one of the finest subjects for the development of true culture.

From lecturer and from lectured have I received letters suggestive and appreciative. From the three or four thousand letters that have come from the people I cull a few extracts which exhibit both spontaneity and spirit. The writers belong to the company of that boy inquirer who recently came to the Free Circulating Library and asked for a book entitled "How to Get Educated and How to Stay So." Here are the extracts:

"I know a little now, and if I want to know more the lectures have pointed me the way. In these lectures fashions don't cut no ice, and you can leave your pocketbook at home and be just as much thought of."

"We live year after year in this neighborhood, principally to be near these great advantages."

"My only regret is that the season is so near finished, as I have come to look forward to my evenings at the Museum as the best evenings of the week."

"Speaking of the lectures of Professor Barnes: These lectures have been a great helpfulness to me in my relation to my children, and will be of still greater helpfulness in what shall follow in my better general understanding of life."

"The lectures are a boon to us mothers. They keep us in touch with our sons and daughters at high school."

"Three months ago I came from Turkey to New York; since then I attended regularly to the lectures which take place at the Natural Museum of History; these lectures are indeed much interesting and wholesome; I got much benefit from them. These thoughts always turn in my mind that American government does every possible thing for the benefit and advancement of the people. A government like this is exemplary and enviable, therefore it is worthy to live under."

"In am an old bachelor and live in a furnished room; I have no place to spend my evenings except in the saloons, and I suppose I have saved \$100 by attending these lectures, for which I am very thankful to the Board of Education."

"I work hard all day from 9 to 5:30 and to look forward to this entertainment once or more times a week is a sweetener of labor."

A teacher writes: "I do not think I can show my appreciation more fully than by the fact that in spite of being tired out when Friday night comes, and notwithstanding other engagements, I simply could not stay from one of the lectures. My only regret is that they end so soon."

"I am a busy housewife and the lectures have created for me a different mental atmosphere and have afforded about the only amusement that has come into my life. The knowledge there so freely received has broadened my range of thought and enabled me to answer more fully the many questions of my small daughter, thereby giving correct information to that little mind which is 'wax to receive and marble to retain.' I got my First Aid Diploma at the end of Dr. Berry's course in 1901, and am

glad to have had the opportunity to brush up my knowledge in the same under Dr. Lawrence this year."

"It strikes me that Sunday lectures, especially of a musical nature, will do far more toward purifying the morals of the city than any amount of legislation tending to regulate the liquor traffic."

"I haven't had any education to speak of except that which I manage to pick up here and there. I am thirty-one years old and appreciate now very much any form in which I gather it. I am trying at this age to overcome as much as I can my colossal ignorance, and I have attended all the lectures I could find time for in the last three months. During the last three months I have attended at least forty-five lectures in various places. Every one has been of great benefit to me and I thank every one who has had anything to do with them. I followed all of Mr. Ker's course on Electricity and took one of the books on the subject. Mr. Ker was able to make on me a decided impression, and I would like to go further if possible. Also from Mr. Von Nardroff I gathered a great deal of information."

A lady who has attended nearly all the lectures at Cooper Union writes: "I am reading the prescribed books and will continue my study of them during the summer months. Every day I congratulate myself on being an inhabitant of a city which is being turned into a vast university for the people. I have attended nearly all the lectures on Electricity, Astronomy and on the chief European cities, and have enjoyed them all exceedingly."

The spread of the hunger for knowledge among the people, which is illustrated by these letters, makes the task of adult education yearly more important and more difficult. The great fountains of organized knowledge, the University, must refresh with their

delight the common people and make their light shine among them. The day is gone when education was the privilege of the patrician, and when the man and the gentleman spoke a different tongue. The spread of democracy is abroad in the world and the educated man must justify his education by the nobility of its use. Modern scholarship must be allied to unselfish service, and modern scholarship and modern knowledge, wherever gained, become worthy of their names only when they help to make men.

The theory that the mass must toil, so that the elect may be enabled to cultivate the higher virtues, has long since been exploded and we believe now that the masses are "dull because they have never been cultivated." Nor do we longer believe that the majority of a community must forever be condemned to the long drudgery of toil. The shortening of the hours of labor is bringing to the workman increased leisure and the proper environment must be given him to wisely use that leisure so that the hours after dinner shall become not the most insipid and sanguine but the most joyous and uplifting.

The larger the number of those who can appreciate the fine work of art or the great work in literature, the higher the ethical standard among the common people, the nobler will be the conduct of the public men of America, for the fountain can rise no higher than its source.

So, believing that society is an organism, and that what hurts any portion hurts the whole, it behooves us to spread through life the exhilarating influence of a noble education. "No state, however ideal, can do away with the necessity of daily human toil—it can idealize the conditions of toil, it can further the freedom and opportunity of individual

life and so make possible the increase of human wealth."

"Every increase in strength, in beauty, in accomplishment, in goodness, brought about by betterment of life's conditions, through the idealizing of daily toil, means increased power to use this lengthening leisure to advantage. The leisure of the working people will be one of the forward movements in civilization." "We are great cowards," Mr. Henderson says, "if we believe that the masses of the people kept in health by a wholesome amount of daily toil, and once more erect with self-respect, are going to squander a leisure to which they bring good health and high spirit and a social heart."

The agent, then, in this work of education for leisure is this medium, and the place, the schoolhouse. The schoolhouse of the future must be planned with the idea of its being a place of adult education. How few adults ever visit the scene of their school days! By the extension of the school for all purposes, it becomes, as Horace Mann says, "not only a nursery for children but a place of intelligent resort for men. The school will no longer be an institution for diffusing the mere rudiments of knowledge, but the means of bountiful diffusion of knowledge itself." There should be no necessity for citizens desiring to add to their culture to get it either in low, ily ventilated and unattractive school yards, or to climb sixty or seventy steps and then to sit on a bench designed only for children. In the newer schoolhouses now being built, the wise Board of Education is providing for a number of school halls, a type of which is the new Wadleigh High School. This is splendidly decorated and comfortable, and thus being a thing of beauty will become a joy forever. Why should New York not have two or three great science halls

where laboratories could supplement the lectures on Science? Perhaps such an American institution might inspire one who would become a Faraday and the production of one Faraday, Huxley says, is worth millions.

The number of churches that are interested in the work and offer the use of their halls is increasing—a splendid sign of the times—and in a few years when the sixty-five Carnegie library buildings will form intellectual powerhouses throughout the city, the efficiency of the lecture course will be increased, for under the stimulus of the lecturer's suggestion, the reading of the best literature will be correspondingly encouraged and in some of the very buildings the lecture hall will be placed. Most gratifying has been the circulation of our platform libraries during the past season, and many visitors now look at the collection in our Art and Science Museum with other eyes.

The problem of education, as is well known, depends on environment. At the beginning of the 19th century, three per cent. of the population of our land lived in cities. At the beginning of the 20th century, 33 1-3 per cent. are city dwellers. The city is the most important factor in our national life, so that the most important of all duties is to constantly provide by larger educational investment for the creation of true civic ideals. As Mr. Ely has said, "Is it without significance that the words *polite* and *urbane* are both derived from words meaning city." We have been led to believe that the man from the country is the successful man, but in the future the city man shall wield the power. To-day our honored Mayor is a city man, and the President of the United States city bred. Looking back over recorded history, we see that great cities, Jerusalem and Rome and Athens and Florence, were

the centers of the best and noblest in thought and action. Our social troubles are not caused by undigested securities, but by unprepared men. The remedy lies not in a further extension of the suffrage, but in the education of those who are to use that sacred prerogative.

We are soon to celebrate the 250th founding of our noble city. May we not hope that its citizens from all classes—all races—all creeds, may be fed by the fountain of knowledge—that all their life, from the cradle to the grave, they may be learners—that all our citizens, and not a few only, will mean to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God, and all who have knowledge or information or power may, in the words of Professor Peabody, “guide knowledge to the feet of service and lift service to the height of knowledge,” and thus may our city set a pattern to all other cities on the road to civic righteousness and national justice.

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